

UNCLAS RANGOON 000444

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/PD KFOSTER, EAP/BCLTV JGLAZEROFF, PLEASE PASS
TO USAID CWEGMAN, TFERRARA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAQ](#) [FAID](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#) [ASSK](#)

SUBJECT: FUNDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPOSITION
YOUTH

¶1. Summary: In three separate meetings in recent months, democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) has raised the issue of providing educational opportunity to opposition youth who are denied the right to attend Burmese universities and denied passports to travel abroad for study. She has appealed for some way to provide "correspondence courses" so that these youth can continue to work toward a degree at a recognized institution of higher learning. Post endorses this idea as being worthy of support and suggests Department investigate a grant arrangement with a university or education NGO to administer a correspondence program.

¶2. Apparently fearful of the political power of an organized student body, which manifested itself in political uprisings in 1988, 1990, 1994, and 1996, the military regime has succeeded in effectively destroying Burma's university system. Universities were closed for six out of the last ten years. Campuses were relocated to distant suburbs so students would have less time to congregate together. Now "distance learning," the Ministry of Education's latest affront to education, allows students to attend classes two weeks a semester after months of "self study." At the same time the regime degraded the university system, they built up a system of degree institutions for the military, to which their own children are ensured entrance.

¶3. However, there is no place in either side of the two tier system for political dissidents. Younger political prisoners arrested in 1996 and recently released on the occasion of a visit from a UN envoy have learned that they may not return to their studies to complete their university degree. (Several of them have been admitted to English classes at the American Center free of charge to give them some possibility for self-improvement.) Children of dissidents are also denied places at university as punishment for their parents' misdeeds. Former political prisoners are also denied passports. They may not go abroad even if they had the economic wherewithal to afford overseas study. (Oppression by the regime ensures they do not.)

¶4. ASSK has asked us, if students may not go to the university, to find a way to bring the university to them. Post suggests the department investigate a grant to a university or educational NGO to administer a program of correspondence (not/not internet-based distance learning) courses leading to an undergraduate degree at an accredited institution for opposition-affiliated youth who are denied other educational opportunities.

¶5. Post Public Affairs Section could assist the grant program in the following ways:
-- assist program (or university) administrator with identifying candidate students;
-- offer students use of the American Center Library and reference service;
-- offer students limited use of personal computers to complete assignments;
-- offer occasional writing labs and discussion sessions for student participants;
-- facilitate mailing of course material and assignments via diplomatic pouch.

¶6. Post estimates that the program may require a full-time administrator at first, possibly dropping to half-time after the program is established. If not resident in Rangoon, the administrator would probably need to travel to Rangoon for extended periods. Post estimates that perhaps five qualified candidates could be found for the first semester, and possibly more. They should be fully funded for at least a half-time courseload. If it were possible to also fund a small stipend, students could dispense with working and might be able to handle a full courseload. Even \$100 a month could pay all living expenses. It would be desireable to secure out-year funding, if possible, so that the course of study would not be interrupted.

¶7. ASSK has also appealed to the British Embassy, which has expressed interest in collaborating with Embassy Rangoon, in the same way we have collaborated on other training programs. They are seeking funding to sponsor two students. Their political officer suggested that the Open University in

London might be able to tailor a course of study for the Burmese students. Post would be open to any solution that satisfied the need for higher education, whether it involves a U.S. institution or an English one.

Martinez